



Opening Statement

June 24, 2014

Media Contact: April Ward
(202) 226-8417

Statement of Chairman Michael McCaul (R-TX) Committee on Homeland Security

“Dangerous Passage: The Growing Problem of Unaccompanied Children Crossing the Border”

Remarks as Prepared

Today on the Southwest border we are facing an escalating refugee crisis. Parents are handing over their young children by the thousands to cartels who are profiting by smuggling these kids to the U.S. Many are under the age of 10 – including some barely old enough to walk.

These children, with no parent, relative or legal guardian, risk a perilous and sometimes fatal journey riding buses or trains from Central America via Mexico. As a father of five, it’s unimaginable what would compel a parent to risk the lives of their children on such a dangerous passage, not to mention the risk of sexual assault, exploitation and the potential to be trafficked.

When they arrive at the border, the children are simply turning themselves into the nearest Border Patrol agent. However patrol stations are not set up to handle this massive and growing number of detainees – let alone children. Shelters have been established, like the one at Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio. We’ve all seen the photos of hundreds of children piled on top of each other, and the flow shows no signs of abating. Every member of this Committee, including myself, is gravely concerned about the safety of children no matter where they come from.

Since October, 52,000 unaccompanied minors have crossed into the United States from Mexico – nearly two thirds of those crossed through the Rio Grande Valley in Texas. CBP estimates that next year more than 150,000 unaccompanied children may attempt to cross our borders.

This is a crisis that has been in the making for years – one that we should have seen coming – but few concrete actions have been taken. The Department of Homeland Security, and the U.S. government as a whole, has been slow to act, turning a blind eye to the warning signs.

The tragic fact is these children are making a dangerous journey based on misinformation and the false promise of amnesty.

The first step is for the Administration to acknowledge the cause of this problem. No one questions the fact that there are horrible economic conditions and violence in Central America. But these conditions are not new.

What is new is a series of Executive Actions by the Administration to grant immigration benefits to children outside the purview of the law – a relaxed enforcement posture – along with talk of comprehensive immigration reform.

It is beyond dispute that such a narrative shapes behavior and encourages people to come to our country illegally. In fact, newspapers in El Salvador and Honduras seem to be encouraging youth to head to the United States based on these policies. And recent internal DHS surveys of these children reveal that more than 70% believe they are going to stay in the country.

This Administration should send an unambiguous message that those arriving will be promptly sent home. I, for one, do not want to see another child harmed because we have not clearly articulated the realities on the ground, consistent with current law.

Yesterday, I was glad to see Sec. Johnson's open letter to the parents of children crossing our Southwest border notifying them that there are no free passes into the United States. This is a good start but more must be done.

In addition to a robust and effective public service campaign we should also engage with the government of Mexico to step up their efforts to secure their southern border. I call on the President of Mexico, and his interior minister to do just that.

I am very concerned that this recent surge is weakening our border security efforts here at home. Border Patrol Agents and ICE officers who are looking after these children are being taken away from their main duty of tracking down drug and weapons smugglers, as well as criminal aliens. Operational control of the Rio Grande Valley, the busiest sector in the nation may be suffering, and cartels will no doubt exploit the situation.

Recently, the state of Texas announced that it would surge border security operations along the border to fill a void left by the Federal government. Securing the border is a responsibility of the Federal government. States should not need to protect what is in the Federal government's role under our Constitution. The President needs to immediately send the National Guard to the Southwest border to deal with this crisis.

We need to find solutions to this crisis, and soon. While Secretary Johnson has largely inherited the current situation, I look forward to hearing how he is responding to this emergency. Again, I want to thank the witnesses for agreeing to appear on such short notice.

###